

5. SLOTH BEAR'S (*MELURSUS URSINUS*) METHOD OF HUNTING FOR TERMITE NESTS

I have been acquainted with a female sloth bear (*Melursus ursinus*) and its cub — now a sub-adult, off and on, for about a year now. The area where these animals have been operating is the North Eastern Section of the lower plateau of the Nilgiris; the Sigur Forest Range. This is a dry belt where the rain fall is scanty and the type of forest is scrub. Precipitation comes from the N.E. as well as the S.W. monsoons, but the area is at the tail end of both; and summer showers. The bears are seen most often in winter when the *Zizyphus* is in fruit and during the rains.

The pre-monsoon showers were late in coming this year (1983). When the first showers fell in the middle of May the bears started coming out regularly hunting for termites. During the first diggings they seldom got to the termite nests except along the banks of the Sigur River where it was comparatively moist. The mother bear did most of the serious digging. In spite of the poor ratio of success the bear continued to open up the ground, wherever it suspected termite nests lying below — including about a dozen holes in our property all within a radius of one km. At first this seemed to be a random digging spree. Most of the termite nests had no mounds over them but were in the pre-mound stage flush with the ground, only a small hole showing. Only a bear would know that these were termite holes. These were mostly in the open where the ground was hard and rain water drained quickly. These diggings were not deep but extended just as far as the moist earth would allow without much effort. Many of

these holes were deepened and enlarged as and when it rained. The bears did not spend much time at these holes even when there was a prospect of finding a termite nest, say, 20 cms away. They were in a hurry, literally on the run, all the time they were abroad. They were usually out by 1600 hours and some times did not retire until 0700 or 0730 hours. As rain continued to fall the bears were more successful. They were able to dig out termite nests whole, usually at depths ranging from 25 to 40 cms. Their droppings during this period were composed almost entirely of termite remains and earth. Being the honey season, they probably robbed a few bee hives as well.

It may be mentioned that sightings as well as tracks showed that these were the only bears in the area, occasionally joined by a large aggressive male bear. The observation extended over a 4 week period from the middle of May. During this period fairly heavy rain fell on 4 days, moderate showers on 6 days and light showers and drizzle on 6 days.

It began to dawn on me that what initially seemed to be a mad act had a method to it. The adult bear was deliberately employing the strategy of making the rain aid its digging efforts, just as a gardener when trying to dig a pit in hard ground would make a small trial pit, pour water to soak the ground; dig a little deeper and pour more water and repeat the process until the desired depth is reached. Or am I crediting the bear with human intelligence — of distinguishing cause and effect? Quite possibly bears have the ability to reason.

“CHEETAL WALK”,  
MASINIGUDI,  
NILGIRI HILLS 643 223,  
June 15, 1983.

E.R.C. DAVIDAR